

The Spectacles Before Us Were Indeed Sublime (Coda) presents a fictional cruise ship named *E*. Using the ship as a platform from which to reimagine the colonial past in the present era, the project questions the implications of maritime travel not only as a starting point for modern colonialism, but more broadly for diasporas and migration. The first screen depicts a flag at the bow of the cruise ship. A multitude of possible destinations are announced in the form of words extracted from the maritime vocabulary all beginning with the letter “e”. The second channel shows the waves left in the ship’s wake.

The installation’s soundtrack mixes field recordings with excerpts from songs *Kokomo* by the Beach Boys and *Wade in The Water* by Eva Cassidy, a popular white singer. While the first piece refers to a fictitious idyllic tropical island, the second is a reappropriation of a religious song that allegedly contained instructions to fugitive black slaves on how to avoid capture and the route to take to successfully make their way to freedom.

X. juxtaposes the Western elite’s desire for escapism, luxury and exoticism, whose stereotypes are perpetuated in popular music with colonial narratives historically hidden or passed over in silence. Bringing together both current and historical issues, the artist makes use of fiction through the narrative of the cruise ship to explore these considerations. The work depicts an environment on the edge of the virtual and the deliberately ambiguous representation of nature to generate questions rather than limit them. The artist creates a significant temporal tension between the colonial past and current mass tourism and illustrates how imperialism and a certain fear of the other are reinforced through the travel industry.

The projects presented as part of this exhibition reflect on the “large” from a perspective informed by the advancement of modern technologies. The “large” is no longer a mere expanse of water with indeterminate borders, but a tool for thinking about the new virtual landscapes that are increasingly becoming part of everyday life. By addressing the power structures that control the information and the interactions of the individual with technology or the chiasm between the natural and the artificial, the artists of the exhibition take a critical stance against the ever-increasing presence of the digital. The relevance of these projects stems in part from the acknowledgement of their participation in the perpetuation of these systems, while subverting their strategies to divert them from their primary function.

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Le large

Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe
Philip Gagnon
Xuan Ye

July 4 - August 28, 2019

Curators
Kaysie Hawke
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Gallery AVE
901 Lenoir St., B-105, Montreal



This exhibition originated from a call for emerging curators launched by the gallery AVE (arts visuels émergents) and brings together artists Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe, Philip Gagnon, and Xuan Ye, who were in turn selected following a call for projects. Through multidisciplinary practices, the works presented use digital strategies to reflect on the effects of technology and virtuality on contemporary perceptions of the “large”.

A measure that exceeds the “normative”, the “large” can allude to the relations of scale between objects as much as the distance between two points or the idea of accumulation. It also refers to an expansive space, with indefinite and open horizons whose boundaries lay beyond the gaze and comprehension. In popular culture, the “large” relates to the desire for escape and travel, as evidenced by common French expressions “prendre le large” and the proliferation of tropical paradise images on social media. While it reflects the underlying capitalist values linked to tourism, the “large” can also evoke exile, diasporas and migration.

Drawing from these concepts, the artists in the exhibition share a common perspective of the “large” as dematerialized and invisible. Although it has traditionally been rooted in the natural world, these projects manifest a shift towards a virtual landscape informed by new technologies and their ubiquity. No longer referring to distant lands, vast oceans or unexplored regions, the “large” has migrated from the natural world to the digital and the invisible structures that support it.

Vanguard I (The Five-Body Problem) by Anna Eyler and Nicolas Lapointe refers to one of the first satellites in the history of space exploration still orbiting the Earth to this day among other space debris. Having terminated its mission in 1964, Vanguard 1 is resuscitated, replicated and mutated into a colony of satellites evocative of a virus. Both biological and technological in nature, they roam through a virtual codified landscape. Alternating from micro to macro perspectives, from distant space to the ethereal body of the machine infested by these satellite viruses, *Vanguard I* recovers an obsolete technology and transforms it into a hybrid sentient organism.

The work revitalizes Vanguard 1, and reverses its parameters by imprisoning the latter in a structure reminiscent of the panopticon. The satellite whose purpose was the gathering of information is now subject observed. Indeed, the panopticon can only be activated if the object/subject of surveillance is self-aware. Not only does the work reveal the setbacks of technology, but it also suggests an alternative subjectivity. *Vanguard I* ventures into an uncharted region of being by emphasizing the ever-narrowing abyss between the living and the virtual.

If the “large” can be seen in this chasm, it also transpires through the accumulation of information suggested by the work’s structural composition. A transparent monolith whose architecture hints at data centres, the work showcases the technological devices required for its operation. A cascade of wires and circuits highlights the extent of the connections and the networks it sustains. Although the work impresses due to its size, it nonetheless evokes the invisible power structures inherent to the collection of information characteristic of a society based on surveillance.

Fabuleux horizons by Philip Gagnon seeks to confront the absence in the urban environment of the “large” as horizon. The work uses as a starting point a three-dimensional modelling of an undulating water surface with a beach and palms in the background. This representation of a tropical fantasy made from a preset contained in a 3D animation software, explores the seemingly unbridgeable gap between nature and artifice, and the limitations inherent to simulated images of the “large”.

Performativity, documentation and even merchandise comprise *Fabuleux horizons*. The work, because it is conceived in several parts and moments, remains impossible to appreciate in its totality. The spectator is therefore confronted with a fragmented experience, having only a partial view of a larger whole.

The artist is also interested in the object of the postcard, an item iconic of travel brimming with nostalgia. The postcard can be understood as an image at odds with those circulating on social media, namely through its outdated and cliché status. All but instantaneous, the postcard requires much effort to reach few recipients and offers a standardized and unchanging landscape which excludes the individual.

Using these notions, Philip Gagnon attempts to disrupt the artificial nature of these images by infiltrating them. Through a series of actions in which he interacts with various objects and devices, he experiments with the body’s exhaustion when confronted with the renewable energy of digital tools and interferes in the process of creation and dissemination of images from popular culture. He thus takes a critical look at the proliferation of images and the place of the individual in these artificial landscapes.

I, It’s, The by Xuan Ye (X.) was created from the quick typing function built into smartphones. By producing sentences based on suggestions from the artificial intelligence (AI) program, the artist initiates a series of conversations with herself. Always in sets of three, the suggested terms are based on the artist’s own writing patterns as determined by the program from previous conversations. A collaboration between X. and the programs’ algorithms, the fragmented and at times contradictory sentences generated question the idea of authorship.

The self and its technological projection inform each other, causing the dissolution of the borders that differentiate them. This shift manifests the fluidity of identity, exemplified by the projection of captures from these conversations on the backdrop of an upward cascading waterfall. A recurrent theme in the artist’s practice, water symbolizes the porous and fluctuating nature of identity. At once familiar and strange due to the somewhat random interventions of the algorithms, the tone of these conversations contributes to distancing the subject from itself. Once more, the gap between the subject and its technological counterpart narrows, creating a hybrid entity. The exponential nature of AI that feeds on the information offered by and collected from the artist augments human experience. Through the union of technology and the human, it opens a new field of experience that remains uncharted, etching towards the posthuman.

If X. plays into the game of data collection and the uninterrupted surveillance of computerized systems, it is partly to reinvest this process by consciously integrating it. Allowing for the creation of a new identity in constant expansion, this process also highlights the program’s imperfections by exposing the tautologies and irregularities that occur. The work thus hesitates between adopting a posthumanist standpoint or resisting the power structures that regulate the technologies that make this posture a possibility.